Pentagon Told to Spend Study Money

Clinton Supports AIDS, Breast Cancer Research, Panetta Asserts

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In a rare public scolding, the White House told the Pentagon yesterday not to hold up money earmarked for breast cancer and AIDS research.

Chief of Staff Leon E. Panetta released a letter he sent to Defense Secretary William J. Perry in which he said President Clinton was disturbed by a report the military might not spend $180 million allocated for the research.

The Washington Post reported yesterday that $30 million earmarked for AIDS research and $150 million for breast cancer research might not be spent because the Pentagon did not consider them essential parts of the military's medical program.

The Pentagon's chief budget planner, appearing yesterday before the Senate Budget Committee, said the Clinton administration supports continued military financing for AIDS research.

Comptroller John Hamre said such research is proper because it is geared toward military needs in wartime. Because blood transfusions need to be conducted on the battlefield, an accurate AIDS test must be developed, he said.

However, Hamre said the Pentagon does not support the $150 million provision for breast cancer research, which has been criticized as unrelated to the military. The comptroller said that money was added by Congress and was not part of the administration's plan.

Clinton, whose mother died of breast cancer last year, made clear his sentiments through Panetta.

"The president believes that research to combat these deadly diseases is vitally important to all Americans, and it is of special significance to him," Panetta wrote. He said 46,000 women die of breast cancer each year and 40,000 Americans died of AIDS last year. "The president believes that we cannot afford to allow these tragic losses to continue," Panetta said. "And that is why breast cancer and AIDS research is a high priority for this administration."

White House spokeswoman Ginny Terzano acknowledged the public rebuke to Perry was a little unusual, but she said, "The president feels strongly about both of these issues and thinks financial support is important, and he wanted to reiterate that to Secretary Perry." Emphasizing the message was directed at Congress as well, she added the White House "feels it's important for those on Capitol Hill to know" the extent of Clinton's support.